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American Anthropologist

NEW SERIES

ORGAN OF THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW YORK AND THE PHILADELPHIA ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY

RALPH LINTON, *Editor*
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VOLUME 43

MENASHA, WISCONSIN, U. S. A.

PUBLISHED BY

THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

1941

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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

THE COMANCHE SUN DANCE AND MESSIANIC OUTBREAK OF 1873

114 A confirmation of the Comanche Sun Dance[1] occurs incidentally in the valuable 668 historical work of Professor R. N. Richardson.[2] Richardson does not treat of the Sun 796 Dance itself, but he has produced some important cultural data that deserve to be called to the attention of anthropologists.

The recent work of Spier on the Prophet Dance of the Northwest[3] has established the cultural matrix of the several messianic cults of western North America in a number of deep-lying and apparently ancient, indigenous traits. The Comanches can also be fitted into this picture.

663 It is an hitherto unrealized fact that the Comanches in 1873 had their own short- 182 lived messianic outbreak. It is particularly notable that they did not use the cere- 535 monial form of the then current Prophet Dance (with which they most likely had 796 no direct contact). It was the Sun Dance which was adopted as the ceremonial vehicle! The Sun Dance was a wholly new feature in Comanche culture, devoid of associations which tied it too closely to other religious ends; and it possessed the elements of ritualized supernaturalism and the novel and spectacular which seem to be so important in messianic revivalism.

668 Richardson's fully documented account, which is derived from the official communications of observers who were in the field at the time,[4] reveals the following essential facts (corroborated at some points by the field notes taken by the Santa Fe Laboratory of Anthropology Ethnology Field Study Group, 1933):

a) "When conditions were already alarming (i.e., unrest on the Kiowa-Comanche reservation), the Comanches conceived the idea of holding a tribal medicine dance similar to the annual ceremonies of the Kiowas. This was a new thing for the Comanches."[5]

668 b) This idea was promulgated by the famous young medicine man and warrior, 792 Isatai, whose prestige was based upon a number of powers. He had established his invulnerability to bullets (which was common enough), and he had "raised the dead." But more important were his successful predictions that the comet which was attracting much attention at the time would disappear within five days and that it would be followed by a summer-long drought. According to the reports, he had also "ascended above the clouds, where he had communed with the Great Spirit."[6]

113 [1] Cf., R. Linton, *The Comanche Sun Dance* (American Anthropologist, Vol. 37, 1935), pp. 420–428.

[2] R. N. Richardson, *The Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement* (Glendale, Cal., 1933), pp. 373 ff.

[3] L. Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives* (General Series in Anthropology, No. 1, 1935).

[4] F. W. Smith and J. W. Smith to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Sept. 26, 1874, Central Superintendency, S 1328; Haworth to Beede, April 25, 1874; Haworth to Hoag, May 6, 1874.

[5] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 372. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 372.

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c) After Iʂatai had issued the call for the Sun Dance "which was widely heralded, and when the tribesmen assembled in May at a point on Red river near the agency boundary, every band was represented, several of them by almost one hundred percent of their people. . . . The great chiefs of the past had never been able to bring the scattered threads of the tribe together, but now a youthful warrior was about to accomplish that."[7]

d) The doctrine which Iʂatai preached was as follows:

a') The Caddoes, Wichitas and other tribes which had settled into reservation life were "going down hill fast" in numbers and well-being.

b') This was the fate in store for the Comanches if they heeded to the demands of the government.

c') But if they would turn to the war path and annihilate the Whites, then they would again become powerful and prosperous.

d') With his supernatural power he was empowered to cover all the warriors with immunity to bullets, and so he could guarantee the success of the venture against the Whites.[8]

e) Because of the violent tenor which the councils took, the pinəteka (Swift Stingers) band of Texas Comanches and a few other smaller groups withdrew and departed for home.

f) When the Sun Dance was finished he led a great war party of Comanches, accompanied by some Kiowas and Southern Cheyenes, south into Texas to wipe out the buffalo hunters who had their headquarters at Adobe Walls. There they came up against the new large caliber, long-range buffalo guns with which the professional buffalo hunters were equipped. The effect was disconcerting and disastrous. Iʂatai was discredited, and though he did not receive the horse-whipping that some of the warriors threatened, his influence as a prophet and leader was ended.[9]

g) But the fire Iʂatai had set was not yet burned out. Throughout that summer and the next year scores of murderous attacks were made upon white travelers and settlements throughout the southern plains. The result was to provoke determined military action and the abandonment of the Quaker Policy in Indian Affairs on the part of the United States. By 1875 the Comanches were militarily crushed, and that year "marks the end of their influence as a frontier factor of significance."[10]

So ended the Comanche experience with militant messianism in 1873–74.

In conclusion, attention may be called to the significance of these data for the question of North American prophet cults. Wallis[11] has summarized the materials which demonstrate a general and long-standing tendency to messianic attempts in this part of the aboriginal world. Spier, in proving the roots of the Ghost Dance in the Prophet Dance complex of the northwestern tribes, has laid stress upon the indigenous nature of regeneration of the dead in the cultures of that area.[12] The

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 374. [8] Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes*, unpublished.
[9] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 376. Also, Hoebel, *Comanche Field Notes*.
[10] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 397.
[11] W. D. Wallis, *Messiahs: Christian and Pagan* (Boston, 1918), Chap. V.
[12] Spier, *op. cit.*, *in toto*.

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Comanches, who stem from the northern Shoshones, not uncommonly experienced the return from the spirit world on the part of those who had died. It may be said of the Comanches that they had all the basic cultural materials for the prophet cult, such as Spier describes, except the dance form. And they used the Sun Dance to fill this need.

The crisis situation which Kroeber,[13] Lowie,[14] Wallis,[15] and Lesser[16] have emphasized as essential to the emergence of Plains messianism had arisen in the southern plains long before 1890. It may well have been that a Ghost Dance could have swept northward from the Comanches in 1873 had not their initial effort ended in such utter disaster.

As is well known, Professor Kroeber has laid the indifference of the California tribes to the great movement of 1890 to "immunization" by their previous experience in the 1870's.[17] This thesis aptly applies to the Comanches, who were coldly indifferent to the Ghost Dance which raged through the Plains at the end of the century. The sole Comanches to take up that dance were a few northerners who were in close contact with their dancing neighbors, and the Swift Stingers band—the one Comanche band which had refused to participate in the outbreak of 1873.[18] Mooney's explanation, which laid the Comanche rejection of the Ghost Dance to a "general skeptical temperament of the Comanches" and to a "tribal pride against borrowing from others, as they considered their own mescal rite sufficient,"[19] must now be discarded in its entirety.

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THE SOUTHERN UTE PEYOTE CULT

In his article on *The Character and History of the Southern Ute Peyote Rite*,[1] Dr Marvin K. Opler presents a description of the cult and an interpretation of the conditions relating to its acceptance which warrant further discussion. In January, 1938, I spent a week with peyotists on the Ute Mountain reservation at Towaoc, Colorado, in circumstances ideal for learning about peyotism.[2] Several coincidences contributed to my being favorably received: at Blanding, Utah, on my way to Colorado, I had been instrumental in having two Towaoc peyotists released from jail, where they

[13] A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 78, 1925).

[14] R. H. Lowie, *Primitive Religion* (New York, 1924), pp. 193–195.

[15] Wallis, *op. cit.*, pp. 148–149.

[16] A. Lesser, *The Pawnee Ghost Dance Hand Game* (Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology, xvi, 1933), p. 59. [17] Kroeber, *op. cit.*, pp. 868–869.

[18] James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Bureau of American Ethnology, Report 14, 1896), pp. 901–902. [19] *Ibid.*

[1] (American Anthropologist, 42, 1940), pp. 463–478.

[2] Incidental to a Culture Element Distribution Survey under the auspices of the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley.

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